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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD SEEKS POST-IRAQI ELECTIONS
SUPPORT FROM SAUDI LEADERS

REF: SECSTATE 23102

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES C. OBERWETTER
FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (S/NF) Summary: U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Khalilzad met with King Abdullah, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, and General Intelligence Presidency director Prince Muqrin bin Abd al-Aziz on December 27, to seek Saudi support in Iraq for building an Arab Sunni-Kurdish-Alawi coalition to engage the Shia-Kurdish alliance in forming a national unity government. Ambassador Khalilzad stressed that the elections had gone well; turnout was very high and, while accusations of fraud and corruption had to be investigated thoroughly, experts who had significantly observed the elections did not believe that the level of fraud and corruption had affected the results. He acknowledged that the results were not what had been hoped for, and stressed the need to build a coalition and establish a national unity government, both to stabilize Iraq and to contain and turn back Iranian political successes in the country. King Abdullah promised Saudi cooperation, but was deeply skeptical of the chances of success and even appeared to question the bonafides of U.S. policy in Iraq. He commented that whereas in the past the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Saddam Hussein had agreed on the need to contain Iran, U.S. policy had now given Iraq to Iran as a "gift on a golden platter." In their meeting with Ambassador Khalilzad, Foreign Minister al-Faisal and Prince Muqrin listened carefully to the Ambassador's proposals and reviewed ongoing Saudi political efforts in Iraq. They also asked whether the U.S. would approve SAG officials meeting with radical Iraqi dissident cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his representatives in an effort to detach him from Iranian influence. End Summary.

2. (S/NF) U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad met December 27 in Riyadh with King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal and General Intelligence Presidency director Prince Muqrin bin Abdel Aziz. Ambassador Khalilzad met with the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin together and, later in the afternoon, with King Abdullah, with the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin sitting in. Riyadh Charge d'Affairs, Baghdad PolCounselor and Ambassador's Special Assistant, and Riyadh PolMilChief (Notetaker) attended both meetings.

December 15 Election Went Smoothly

3. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad told the Saudi leaders that procedurally, the December 15 elections had gone well. The 70% turnout rate had eclipsed the voting levels of the January elections (58%) and the constitutional referendum (63%). In parts of western Iraq, such as Anbar, there had been dramatic increases in voter participation. Anbar Province had a turnout rate of over 50 percent, versus 2-3 percent last January.

4. (S/NF) All three Saudi leaders expressed concern about reports of voter fraud, including allegations that not enough ballots or ballot boxes had been available in Sunni areas, and that stuffed ballot boxes had been brought into Iraq from Iran. Ambassador Khalilzad acknowledged the reports and said that while experts who had observed the elections did not think that the level of fraud had significantly affected the overall results, the allegations of fraud had to be thoroughly investigated, to assure Iraqis that the elections were legitimate. He said that while the Iraqi Election Commission would have to substantiate the allegations, ideally any investigation should have some international involvement. The Ambassador said that, if the Iraqis agreed, the U.S. would support U.N.-sponsored international participation.

5. (S/NF) Responding to the concerns of the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin about the large number of candidates removed because of their Ba'thist affiliations, Ambassador Khalilzad said the De-Ba'thification Commission (DBC) had looked at 180 names, of which 90 were ultimately removed from candidate lists. He acknowledged the Foreign Minister's argument that it was difficult to not be a Ba'thist under

Saddam's regime and that the DBC had made some inappropriate decisions. He agreed that there needed to be a change in DBC procedures, to bring to justice those who had committed crimes while also stressing reconciliation with former Ba'thists against whom there was no evidence of criminal wrongdoing.

Post-Election: Build a Coalition, then build a Government

16. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad acknowledged that the election results were not what had been anticipated or hoped for. The Shia list, he said, had done better than expected and would probably win 131 seats in the Assembly - down from a past high of 146, but still an excellent result. The Ambassador estimated that other significant results would be 57-58 Assembly seats for the Kurds, 54-55 seats for the two major Sunni factions together, and 25 seats for Alawi's party.

17. (S/NF) Ambassador Khalilzad told Saudi leaders that the Kingdom's support was needed for the vital next step of building a post-election coalition between the Kurds, Alawi, Tawafuq and Mutluq. He said that such a coalition could amount to 130-136 Assembly seats, enabling the Kurds, Sunnis, and others to engage with the Shi'a list in forming a national unity government. Ambassador Khalilzad stressed the importance of encouraging the various groups to think strategically, not tactically, and to dissuade them from striking a separate deal with the Shia. He said in particular that Alawi must not leave Iraq, lest his group fall apart. The Iranians, who he said would seek a Shia-Kurdish alliance, might then buy Alawi's electoral slate.

Foreign Minister - Now they must come together"

18. (S/NF) The Foreign Minister, who indicated that Prince Muqrin was in charge of Saudi outreach to the Iraqi spectrum, commented that "An election is divisive, now they (the Iraqis) must come together." Both leaders agreed with the need for a coalition to engage the Shi'a and were guardedly in agreement with the Ambassador's proposal for Saudi support. They stressed that Saudi Arabia would remain equally distant from all groups and was neither representing nor exclusively supporting the Iraqi Sunnis. They said that efforts to stabilize and unify Iraq must proceed without anyone except Iraqis taking the lead. Saudi support for a stable, united Iraq would include targeted media campaigns and discrete humanitarian aid channeled through Iraqi political and other groups.

19. (S/NF) According to the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin, the Saudi government was already active in seeking Iraqi stability and unity. The Foreign Minister said that Riyadh had formed a group of "like-minded" states to work toward these goals. Prince Muqrin added that after initial meetings with other governments had been undertaken by Ministry of Interior and GIP representatives during the OIC summit in Mecca, Saudi officials had visited a number of countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait, and the UAE for further discussions. He said that in Iraq, the SAG had contacted Iraqis who supported a united Iraq, and encouraged them to pressure the insurgents to end their violence.

110. (S/NF) Prince Muqrin offered to arrange for U.S. officials to meet with some of the disaffected Iraqi leaders. The Foreign Minister added that such meetings would give those leaders great confidence. Ambassador Khalilzad replied that such meetings might be possible, provided that the Iraqis involved were not affiliated with terrorists like Zargawi or with Saddam. The Saudi leaders laughed at the suggestion, noting that "Saddam's people are our enemies and we are looking for Zargawi."

111. (S/NF) The Foreign Minister asked for Ambassador Khalilzad's view of Muqtada al-Sadr. Prince Muqrin explained that al-Sadr had contacted the Saudis, and they believed they had "51-49" chance of bringing him on board, despite his Iranian support. The Ambassador replied that al-Sadr had a large following and that the al-Sadr family members see themselves as righteous leaders, but that Muqtada himself is a little unbalanced. He also noted that al-Sadr was facing murder charges and a warrant for his arrest for the slaying of Iraqi Shi'a leader Abd al-Majid al-Khoie; those would have to be resolved. Ambassador Khalilzad said that the Saudis should talk with al-Sadr "with caution," and that it would be a positive step if the Saudis could ultimately pry al-Sadr away from Iran and Hizballah.

King Abdullah - Giving Iraq to Iran on a Golden Platter

¶12. (S/NF) In his meeting with Ambassador Khalilzad, King Abdullah promised Saudi cooperation with U.S. efforts in Iraq, but also pulled no punches about his skepticism of the chances of success and his anger at developments in Iraq. After thanking the Ambassador for his presentation, King Abdullah remarked that he agreed with everything the Ambassador had told him, though some of what he had said reflected "hopes" and "wishful thinking" rather than reality. He said it was important to separate the two.

¶13. (S/NF) The King said he would speak bluntly. In the past, he noted, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Saddam Hussein had agreed to fight Iran, to prevent Iranian intervention in Iraq and the region. Now, he said, Iran has been presented with Iraq as a "gift on a golden platter." He told the Ambassador that while it was possible to work the Iraqi Shia, most of whom are Arab, that reality is balanced by the influence, threats, and intimidation of Iran.

¶14. (S/NF) King Abdullah said while the MFA and the GIP were working the Saudi policy of unifying Iraq, it was his personal assessment that it will be hard to stabilize Iraq in less than five years. He commented that he believed it would be very difficult and perhaps even impossible to achieve a unified government in Iraq. The balance of political forces is now uneven, with the Iraqi National Assembly dominated by one large bloc. King Abdullah said that Saudi Arabia would work with the U.S. in Iraq, and he prayed to God that the U.S. would succeed, but he had his doubts that there would be success. He told the Ambassador that he would trust to God. In the end, he said, whether we succeed or not is up to God Almighty.

¶15. (S/NF) Finally, the King appeared to caution the Ambassador about the motivations of some of those working the Iraq political process. He said that one of the most important ingredients of success was to have noble, sincere intentions at all levels. He said that "I trust in your sincerity, but what about those under you?" He reminded his visitors again of the will of the one God, to whom everyone prays, regardless of whether they are Jewish or Christian, Sunni or Shia. God, he said, always leads the faithful to success. King Abdullah concluded the meeting by noting that it was near prayer time and that, if he was lucky, he might make it home in time to pray.

Comment

¶16. (S/NF) General Intelligence Presidency stewardship of the Iraq portfolio reflects the degree of Saudi operational interest in trying to effect political success in Iraq. Ambassador Khalilzad's meeting with the Foreign Minister and Prince Muqrin made clear that the Saudis are concerned and politically active over Iraq, which perhaps suggest that, while willing to cooperate with the U.S., such cooperation may be more clearly reflected in SAG parallel efforts to unify the disparate Iraqi political groups and encourage an end to the insurgency, as opposed to direct cooperation. King Abdullah was upset and somewhat emotional and, while not specific, even appeared to be questioning the bonafides of U.S. policy in Iraq. He has on a number of occasions accused the U.S. of handing Iraq to Iran on a golden platter. His disturbing invocation of Saddam Hussein's name in reference to a consensus about Iran suggests that he believes that, post-12/15, Saudi Arabia's fears about Iraqi instability and an increased Iranian threat have been realized. End Comment.

¶17. (U) Ambassador Khalilzad has cleared this cable.
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